DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 273 091 FL 015 826

AUTHOR Nunan, David
TITLE Seeing It Their Way: Learners and Language Curricula.
PUB DATE Mar 86
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (20th, Anaheim, CA, March 3-9, 1986).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Cognitive Development; *Curriculum Development; Developmental Stages; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Indigenous Populations; *Individual Development; Prior Learning; Second Language Instruction; *Student Centered Curriculum
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

The starting point for curriculum planning for second language instruction is the learner, and a curriculum can claim to be learner-centered only if key factors about the learner are made the basis for curriculum design at all stages in the planning and development of learning activities and materials and in the sequencing of learning experiences. These factors include general biographical data; previous learning experience (general and language, formal and informal); experiential knowledge of the world and of the way language works; the learner's stage of linguistic development; the learner's sociocultural knowledge and environment; and his or her stage of cognitive development. Each of these factors makes a unique contribution to curriculum planning and development. Each point is related to a second language learner named Jangala, an Australian aboriginal youth. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED273091

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
David Nunan
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

SEEING IT THEIR WAY: LEARNERS AND LANGUAGE CURRICULA

David Nunan,
National Curriculum Resource Centre,
Renaissance Centre,
Adelaide,
South Australia.

Paper presented at the 20th Annual TESOL Convention, Anaheim, California, 3 - 9 March, 1986.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I would like to argue that the starting point for curriculum planning is the learner. In some circles, learner-centred curriculum planning has become something of a cliche, and there is, in fact, evidence that some teachers and curriculum planners proclaim the most bizarre practices as learner-centred. It is therefore important at the outset for me to clarify what I mean by the term.

I would like to suggest that a curriculum can only claim to be learner-centred if, at all stages in the planning and development of learning activities and materials and in sequencing and ordering learning experiences, key factors about the learner are not only taken into consideration, but are made the cornerstones for curriculum design. These factors include general biographical data, previous learning experience (which includes learning in general as well as language learning, and both formal and informal learning environments), experiential knowledge (which includes knowledge of the world as well as knowledge of language and the way it works), the learner's stage of linguistic development, socio-cultural knowledge and environment and the learner's stage of cognitive development.

I realise that most of these categories overlap in some way (for example, previous learning experience will be heavily constrained by socio-cultural factors). Despite this, each category which is listed has a unique contribution to make to the curriculum planning and development function.

I would like to expand on each if these points in turn. In order to provide a context for the points I wish to make, I should like to relate them to a second language learner called Jangala. The following case description is taken from the Northern Territory (1983) Curriculum Resource Publication:

Jangala is Aboriginal. He is twelve years old and the eldest in a family of six boys. In his tribe's eyes, he is still just a boy, but next year he will become a man. He will go away into the bush with his 'banji' for secret 'men's business' and when he returns he will be a man. His mother

will be very proud of him then, and she won't treat him like a little boy any more.

Jangala's father is an important man in the tribe: he also has an important job on the cattle station where they live. He owns a Toyota 1500 long-wheel-base ute and everyone on the station knows it belongs to Jangala's father. He sometimes lets Jangala drive the little white Toyota and everyone knows that Jangala can drive. He can hardly reach the pedals, but he is very proud that he can drive, and especially proud that his father owns a Toyota. His father also drives the great big grey four-wheel-drive Toyota owned by the station. He uses it in his job and sometimes he takes Jangala for a ride in the back with his brothers.

When Jangala becomes a man and later gets married, he will also be an important man in the tribe like his father. He may even be like his uncle who often flies to Canberra for important meetings with other Aboriginal leaders. His uncle tells him stories about Canberra and says it is even bigger than Alice Springs.

His uncle and the rest of the family often sit around the campfire at night and tell stories to each other. They are all true stories and some of them are very old stories passed down by their grandfathers and grandmothers. None of the older people in Jangala's family can read or write, but they can all tell wonderful stories and they draw pictures in the sand as they tell the stories. Not pictures in the books at schools: they are different pictures with dots for trees, half circles for people and a cross for the fire.

Jangala goes to school on the cattle station every day; well, nearly every day. He doesn't like school much, but if he stays away too long the other children call him 'bush-boy' or 'bush-ranger'. Once Mr White, the headmaster, drove down in his yellow long-wheel-base Land Rover to see Jangala's mother in the camp. He asked his mother why Jangala hadn't been to school for five days and she told Mr. White that she had actually sent Jangala to school, but he went off down to the creek instead to shoot birds with his shanghai. She then picked up a stick (just a little one) and hit Jangala and yelled at him in front of Mr. White. This must have made Mr. White happy because he drove away then and hasn't been back for a long, long time.

Jangala doesn't know why he has to go to school. His father didn't go, his mother didn't go and his uncle didn't go either. In fact there wasn't even a school on the station when they were Jangala's age....

At school, Jangala learns all the letters in the alphabet and to do sums: Mr White says that the children who come to school every day will learn how to read and write. Jangala wonders about this because some young men on the station used to go to school every day and they can't write much. They can write their names though on the bottom of their cheques every pay day.

(Gale 1983:3-4)

I would like to leave Jangala's story there, for the moment, and return to the learner factors mentioned at the beginning of the paper. Jangala and his story will be used as reference points as we proceed.

2. Biographical Data.

The starting point for learner-centred curriculum planning is a consideration of biographical information about your learners. These data include age, nationality, length of time in the second language culture and so on. They are generally fairly easy to collect and are important guides to other factors such as socio-cultural background and stage of cognitive development.

One particularly important learner characteristic is age. There is a school of thought which has it that the psycholinguistic processing operations of all language learners, whether they be first or second language learners, are basically the same, and that, in consequence, all we need do to become successful second language learners is to articulate these principles, turn them into learning activities, and apply them indiscriminately to all learners. I am sure you are familiar with some of the methodologies derived from this belief - the "Natural Approach" (Krashen and Terrell 1983), "Total Physical Response" (Asher 1982) and so on.

These approaches to language teaching have led, in some instances, to some strange practices, particularly in the case of older learners who are made to sing, dance, clap, recite nursery rhymes and read books which were written for small children. I am not trying to suggest that activities and materials suitable for one age group should never be used with another. What I am trying to suggest, is that good sense, sensitivity, and, with older learners, extensive consultation, should guide curriculum construction, and the selection of materials and learning activities.

While one extreme viewpoint has it that the psycholinguistic processing operations of all learners is the same, a less extreme notion is that there is a difference between child and adult learning. I am trying to suggest that even this division is too gross, that we need to make much finer distinctions according to age.

Let's return to Jangala. We know he is almost twelve years old, and therefore almost at the end of primary school age. We know he will have interests and preoccupations which are very different from those of younger children. These particular interests and preoccupations should be the starting point for curriculum planning. Of course, the problem for Jangala's teacher is that she is most likely working in a one-teacher school, and will therefore have the entire range of school age aboriginal children in the one class.

3. Experiential Knowledge

In recent years the influence of experiential knowledge on our ability to process and comprehend language has been extensively studied. As far back as 1933 Bartlett suggested that, through our experience of the world, we build up stereotypical schemata of the way the world works and use these to guide our comprehension. More recently, John Oller (1979) related this notion to language development with his pragmatic expectancy grammar in which he pointed out that comprehension proceeds through the mapping of language onto experiential reality. In this process, our ability to make predictions both about the way the world works and the way language works are extremely important. Consider the following passages:

Passage A:

mua khun pay thun raan ?aahaan khon sɔ̀ɔ p ca
chɘɘn khun nan leew khun kɔ̀ duu menuu
khon sɔ̀ɔp ca r khun
khun yaak ca thaan ?aray khun kɔ̀ san mua
khun thaan set leew khaw kɔ̀ca khit tan
leew kɛ̀ kep tan

Passage B:

If the balloons popped, the sound wouldn't be able to carry since everything would be too far away from the correct floor. A closed window would prevent the sound from carrying, since most buildings tend to be well insulated. Since the whole operation depends on a steady flow of electricity, a break in the middle of the wire would also cause problems. Of course, the fellow could shout, but the human voice is not loud enough to carry that far. An additional problem is that a wire could break on the instrument. Then there could be no accompaniment to the message. It is clear that the best situation would involve less distance. Then there would be fewer potential problems. With face-to-face contact, the least number of things could go wrong.

(Bransford and Johnson 1972)

Most people have great difficulty with both these passages, but for rather different reasons. The first passage is beyond anyone who is unfamiliar with Thai. The second passage, however, contains fairly straightforward language. The syntax and vocabulary should be well within the means of any native speaker. Yet when teachers are asked to listen to the passage and then recall it, they have a great deal of difficulty. This is because they have no context. However, if they have a photograph to provide a context their comprehension improves

dramatically. In neither case are they able to bring their pragmatic expectancy grammar into play.

The implications of all this for second language learners should be obvious. In assisting learners develop their language skills, we should not make things needlessly difficult by forcing them to deal with content which is unfamiliar. In the late seventies in Australia, Hart, Walker and Gray (1977) recorded and analysed large samples of language from children who were between the ages of two and a half and six and a half and found that the language used by the children was very different from that contained in the readers that they encountered in school. How is a child supposed to exploit his emerging knowledge of language and the world to make sense of texts such as the following?

Ann ran. A man ran.
Run, rat, run, run, run, run. Run to a red sun. Run to a red sun. Run, run, run.

(Lippincott's Basic Reading)

I once spent some time in a tribal school with some aboriginal children who were about the same age as our friend Jangala. One morning we walked through the bush to some waterholes where the children had a marvellous time. In the afternoon they went out gathering food with the women.

The following day, I observed the same children at school. The teacher had prepared the lesson with a great deal of thought. She had put a lot of work into collecting pictures and drawings and in devising activities in which there was plenty of repetitive language work without there being any hint of drill. The class itself was taught with energy, and humour. And yet this diligent work was largely wasted. Why? The lesson was about the convict days in Australia, a subject which was totally displaced in time, place and culture for the children, who were unable to relate to it at all.

Earlier I suggested that experiential knowledge includes both knowledge of the way the world works and knowledge of the way language works. Now, naturally, I am not suggesting by this that children are able carry out parsing and analysis. I am suggesting, however, that they have a great deal of tacit knowledge through their experiences with their first language. This has been documented by Howard Nicholas from La Trobe University, who carried out a detailed study of a three year old child called Cindy acquiring German as her second language. He discovered that the child used such things as discourse strategies which she posessed by virtue of her experience as a learner of English to assist her in acquiring German:

> the strategies which Cindy made use of were explicitly related to the structure of the conversation in which she was involved. It seemed to be the case that Cindy was making use of the knowledge which she had developed during her acquisition of a first language.

> Cindy was not making use of English, nor her knowledge of the structure of English. She was making use of her knowledge of how language works... This linguistic insight consisted of the understanging that one can use language to obtain more information about language. One can use language "output" to gain additional language "input" which can, in turn, be used as "intake". Cindy's interlanguage use strategy is, thus, proof that the early stages of interlanguage do not have to be "receptive".
>
> (Nicholas 1985:30).

4. Previous Learning Experience

A spcialised subset of experiential knowledge is our previous learning experience. This is something which has to be taken into account when planning a language curiculum. We carry with us into any new learning experience expectations based on our previous learning experiences. These experiences may have been formal or informal. They may include the experience of having learned another language, or they may not. There is a potential for conflict when learning activities to which a teacher is committed because she believes they best promote the skills she is trying to develop do not accord with the expectations of the learner.

These days, lip service is paid to the fact that learners are different and learn in different ways. We are coming to see that the search for the one best way of teaching everyone language is misguided and probably futile. In Australia, significant research carried out by Willing (1985) shows that learners vary quite dramatically in their learning style preferences. While some learners are happy to learn to communicate by communicating, others want a more structured, conscious experience. Less clear is the genesis of these differences, the degree to which they are innate and the degree to which the reflect previous learning experiences.

The previous learning experiences of our twelve year old friend Jangala will certainly have a significant effect on his expectations. As Christie reports:

> Aboriginal children do not expect to and do not participate in the school program in an active purposeful self-conscious way, but rather in the same way as they participate passively in their day-to-day home life....Passive participation is not sitting back doing nothing. It is doing something in a special way which reflects your view of yourself, your world and the situation you are in. Some aboriginal people in some situations employ active participation but generally, in traditional and modern aboriginal culture, the passive style is preferred. (pp. 11-13)

As someone who has gown up in an aboriginal culture, Jangala will have a rich linguistic inheritance. However, this inheritance will be oral rather than written. We know from the little story I read at the beginning of this paper that Jangala spends a lot of time sitting around the campfire at night listening to the stories told by the tribal elders. He will learn these stories and, one day, pass them on.

This oral experience, although representative of informal learning, should be utilised by the teacher in fostering the growth of second language skills. In this way there is a greater chance of the second language experience having a degree of authenticity which Jangala's formal learning, as described in the story, lacks.

5. Stage of Linguistic Development

Another important consideration is, of course, the learner's stage of development. Once upon a time, this was just about the only consideration, certainly as far as the selection and grading of content is concerned. Since the advent of communicative and experiential approaches to curriculum development, the selection and gradation of content has become much more complex. In recent years, there have been calls for the abandonment of any form of grammatical structuring. It is claimed that if the teacher concentrates on making herself comprehensible to the learners, the language will automatically be at the right level of difficulty. (Krashen 1981, 1982; Krashen and Terrell 1983).

In fact, the acquisition of the syntactic and morphological features of the language is much more complex than is implied by the moniter model. Pienemann (1982) has demonstrated that linguistic structuring and conscious learning can result in acquisition with certain learners. In Australia, Johnston (1985) has studied the acquisition of syntax and morphology using what is probably the largest corpus of data ever collected.

Johnston drew four main conclusions from his study. First, learners behave systematically. Second, there may be a marked disparity between what is learned and what is taught. (For example, learners taught the use of '-ing' to mark progressivity or continuity, actually use this form initially to indicate action, and through this semantic notion a means of establishing a grammatical category. Third, language is active and constructive rather than passive and imitative. Finally, he claims that "teaching which is not directed to distinctions to which the learner is sensitive will probably be much less effective than it might appear to be ... while the teacher is attempting to drum one concept into the learner's head ... the learner is utilising the material in quite a different way."

What does this mean for the language teacher? It should be no surprise to learn, that, in line with everything else that has been said in this paper, it depends very much on the learners themselves. It seems to me

that, for younger learners, it is difficult to support an argument for any form of grammatical structuring. The older the learner, the more complicated things become. I would not be inclined to base my teaching on linguistic structuring, were I teaching Jangala. However, with different types of learners of the same age in a formal learning environment, there may be some benefit in activities aimed at the development of the learner's insights into patterns in language as suggested by Hawkins (1984).

6. Stage of Cognitive Development

The development of communicative curricula and the rise of functional/notionalism has not always resulted in a learner-centred approach to language teaching. I once observed a teacher who subscribed to the latest version of functionalism teaching a group of seven year old children polite requests "Would you mind...?" The effect was ludicrous. A classic instance of the teacher failing to see it the learner's way.

In developing curricula, therefore, it is extremely important to take heed of the stage of cognitive development of the learner, and to consider the sorts of uses to which the learner is likely to put his/her native language.

There are obviously other aspects of the learner's stage of cognitive and intellectual development which will have a marked influence on the processes of curriculum planning. In developmental terms, the stage of mental operations will dictate the degree to which formally structured learning is appropriate.

There is also continuing controversy over the notion of a critical period for second language acquisition. Bever's (1981) reinterpretation of this theory, if supported by further research, may well provide us with clearer guidelines about what type of learning activities are appropriate at different ages. He says that:

> Suppose that the developed systems of speech perception and production become functionally autonomous in the adult ... A reasonable hypothesis is that when speech production and perceptual system are well-aligned with respect to a linguistic property, then internal communication between them is no longer needed for that property. The communication channel falls into disrepair because of disuse. Learning a new language after this time may well be possible, but it will now proceed in a manner fundamentally different from that at a younger age. After this age, the problem of language learning is how to map each of the distinct and separate first language behavioral systems onto the corresponding systems in the second language in partial independence of each other. This is not only

> likely to make the job of learning a language more difficult: it will certainly make it more disjointed. (Bever 1981:193)

Whether or not Bever's claims do represent a serious revamping of the critical period hypothesis remains to be seen. It is certainly premature to discount his work, and the best that can be done is to keep a watching brief pending further psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic research.

7. Conclusion.

For those of you who accept the general thrust of what I have been saying, prospects for the future are rather daunting. The implication of seeing the curriculum construction process from the learner's perspective is that responsibility for curriculum construction must rest, not with curriculum experts but the classroom teacher. It means that the classroom teacher needs the skills and sensitivity to tailor instruction, classroom activities and materials to the learner.

Gray (1983), who has worked extensively with aboriginal children, points out that curriculum development traditionally proceeds from content, through method to teaching learning context. He suggests that, while such a progression seems logical, it is also dangerous, because

> the manner in which content is defined and organised to a large extent dictates and restricts the nature of the teaching method that can be employed and the nature of the teaching learning context that can occur in the classroom. For example, if covering content means that teachers have to ensure that all children have to produce specified items of syntax or certain language functions in a particular teaching session the teachers can hardly sit down and wait for individual children to initiate communication or to trust individual children to select for themselves what language knowledge best suits their present needs. Yet, both of these are important features of natural language learning situations which occur in the children's homes. (p.3)

In attempting to see things from the learner's perspective, Gray stood the traditional model on its head, and came up with the following procedure:

Teaching ..... Develop contexts which encourage
Learning natural language learning strategies
Context

Method ..... Determine methodology which sustains

such strategies

Content ..... Determine:
- the most effective representation of language content which meets the requirements of the contexts and method
- the most effective organisation of content for meeting the children's present and future communication needs.

It seems to me that such a procedure, while placing a great deal more responsibility on the teacher, will facilitate the development of curricula which see things from the learner's perspective.

REFERENCES

Asher, J. 1982. Learning Another Language Through Actions: The Complete Teacher's Guide. Los Gatos Ca.: Sky Oaks Productions.

Bever, . 1981.

Bransford, J. and Johnson, M. 1972. Contextual prerequisites for understanding: some investigations of comprehension and recall. Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behaviour, 11.

Christie, M. 1982. Teaching purposeful reading to aboriginal children. The Aboriginal Child at School, 10, 2.

Gale, M. 1983. Why can't Jangala write? Writing: Collected Articles. Winelli: Northern Territory Department of Education.

Gray, B. 1983. Helping children to become language learners in the classroom. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Meanjin Reading Council, Brisbane, 1983.

Hawkins, E. 1984.

Johnston, M. 1985. L2 acquisition research in the classroom. (Manuscript) New South Wales Adult Migrant Education Service.

Krashen, S. 1981. Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning. Oxford: Pergamon.

Krashen, S. 1982. Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition. Oxford: Pergamon.

Krashen, S. and Terrell T. 1983. The Natural Approach. Oxford: Pergamon.

Nicholas, H. 1985. Interactive strategies, "input" and "output". Paper presented at the 4th ATESOL Summer School, Sydney University, January 1985.

Oller, J. 1979. Language Tests at School. London: longman.

Pienemann, M. 1982. Psychological constraints on the teachability of languages. Paper presented at the Second European-North American Workshop on Cross Linguistic Second Language Acquisition Research. gohrde, West Germany.

Willing, K. 1985. Learning Styles in Adult Migrant Education. Report of the Program Development Project on Identifying and Accommodating Different Learning Styles. Sydney: New South Wales Adult Migrant Education Service.